NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

SAMPLE APPLICATION NARRATIVE

Enduring Questions
Institution: Scripps College

NATIONAL
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DIVISION OF EDUCATION
PROGRAMS

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Excerpt from a Successful Application

This excerpt from a grant application is provided as an example of a funded proposal. It will give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. It is not intended to serve as a model. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with staff members in the NEH Division of Education Programs well before a grant deadline. The excerpt does not include a budget or résumé.

Project Title: What is Happiness?

Institution: Scripps College

Project Director: Nathalie Rachlin

Grant Program: Enduring Questions Course Grants

Nathalie Rachlin -- Scripps College
NEH Proposal – Enduring Questions

What is Happiness?

Intellectual Rationale and Teaching value

The paradox of happiness is that most people want it, but few people can define it. Most people seem to agree that happiness is one of life's most important goals, yet they do not know how to achieve it. Recent studies have shown that people in the US tend to overestimate their degree of happiness, yet, as a society, we have never consumed more "happy" pills, like prozac, than we do today. What are we to make of these apparent contradictions? What is it about happiness that makes the concept and perhaps its reality so elusive? How can a concept that seems so central to our lives, whose pursuit we hold to be an inalienable right, be so hard to pin down? In the last two decades, social scientists, mostly psychologists and economists, have done much research on what makes people happy, a topic that was once primarily the domain of philosophy, ethics, and religion. The "hard" science of happiness is still in its infancy, but neurobiologists are starting to understand the chemistry of happiness, and are even looking for some genetic basis for it. Yet, for all our scientific findings, the concept of happiness remains as mysterious and contradictory as it was 2500 years ago for the ancient Greeks. They conceived of happiness as "eudaimonia," a word comprised of the word "eu" (good) and "daimon" (god, demon, spirit or emissary of the gods). *Eudaimonia* seems to point to a notion of life guided by a good spirit, that is a life subjected to (good) fortune or luck, while at the same time pointing to a notion of life driven by an internal force that strives to get us as close to a state of human perfection, ("godlike") as it is possible for men (and women) to achieve. Through an exploration of the ways in which thinkers across time, across cultures, and across disciplines have tried to answer the question "What is happiness?", this course aims to provide students with a set of

conceptual tools and research findings that can inform their own reflections on what it might mean to be happy.

Why pose the question of happiness in an undergraduate course? The main reason is that happiness is arguably the most important issue of human existence – it permeates and orients everything we do. Furthermore, the question of happiness opens itself up to other, more abstract, but equally important questions about life and its purpose: Is happiness the purpose of life? Or is it rather, the result of finding purpose in one's life? What is a life well lived? Is a life well lived necessarily happy? If a happy life is a meaningful life, what then, is the meaning of my life? What should it be? These questions about the meaning of life are ones that we rarely have time to ponder in our daily lives; young people, especially, may find them off-putting because they seem so vague and so abstract. Yet, these questions about what living is for are at the heart of the question of happiness. It is my hope that by raising these abstract questions about the meaning of life within the framework of a study of happiness, students may find them easier to engage with. Also, the question of happiness goes to the question of self-knowledge: Do we really know what makes us happy? Are we as happy as we claim to be? Do we know what will make us happy in the future? If happiness is getting what we want, do we always like what we want? And do we always want what we like? In the end, thinking about happiness might allow students to answer in a more meaningful way, the questions that all undergraduate students at some point in their career do (or should) grapple with: Who am I? Who should I aspire to be? What should I do with my life? What in life do I care about? What will fulfill me in life? Finally, the question of happiness is a good way to introduce students to new and exciting research currently done across a broad spectrum of disciplines (psychology, economics, neurobiology as well as philosophy,

literature and ethics). It is my hope that this kind of interdisciplinary exploration will provide new insights and no doubt some further puzzlement, into a truly "enduring" question.

The course will start with a historical overview of the evolution of the concept of happiness throughout the history of Western thought. For this mapping of the territory, I will use primarily intellectual historian Darrin McMahon's *Happiness: A History* and Nicholas White's *A Brief History of Happiness.* From there, we will examine in more details three different conceptions of happiness.

1. Feeling good This first conception sees happiness as a sensation, a feeling of well-being, or an emotion. This kind of happiness has both physiological and psychological aspects to it. It can be observed in the brain; people can report how happy or unhappy they feel at the moment, and all of this can easily be measured. This sort of happiness is today the domain of neuroscientists and neuropsychologists. At a higher level of the cognitive process, however, happiness becomes the positive judgment people make about the overall balance of pleasure and pain in their lives. What is then measured is what psychologists call "life satisfaction." We will start our exploration of happiness as "subjective well-being" with a short book that surveys "the science" of happiness, Daniel Nettle's *Happiness: The Science Behind Your Smile*. We will then read excerpts of works by positive psychologists Martin Seligman (*Authentic Happiness*), and Csikszentmihalyi Mihaly (*Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience),* who have done empirical studies of the factors that contribute to human flourishing and who offer ways to improve happiness. We will end this section with Daniel Gilbert's *Stumbling into Happiness*, which questions some of the assumptions made by positive psychologists by showing why people are actually very bad at predicting what will make them happy in the future. As a transition to the next section of the course, we will read Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*.

2. Doing Good This section will examine the social nature of happiness, that is, both the individual happiness we draw from living and working with others, and the collective achievement of happiness. This is the kind of happiness which social scientists and political philosophers are concerned with. We will start our investigation with Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (excerpts*)*, Jeremy Bentham's and John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism, (excerpts) who propose ways to achieve the "greatest happiness for the greatest number." We will then turn to two thinkers who deny that such a goal is possible. We will read Nietzsche's essay about history as a source of social unhappiness, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," and Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* which sees in society's restrictions of the "pleasure principle," an inevitable cause of human suffering. Finally, we will examine two works by contemporary economists who have studied the "economics of happiness," and who refute the notion that the happiness of a society is related to its purchasing power: Richard Layard's *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* and *Luxury Fever: Money and Happiness in an Era of Excess* by Robert Frank. We will conclude this section by discussing Robert Nozick's essay "Happiness " (in his book, *Examined Life)* in tandem with Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World.* Both authors imagine a society which provides people with artificial means of achieving happiness (an "experience machine" [Nozick] or "soma" [Huxley]) and ask whether people could ever be satisfied with virtual or chemically induced forms of happiness.

3. Being Good This last section examines happiness in the tradition of Socrates and Plato as moral and intellectual virtue and in the tradition of Aristotle as human flourishing. Happiness in this conception of the term is neither an emotion nor a mood. Rather, it has to do with the good life and as such, belongs to the domain of religion, philosophy and ethics. We will read selections from Plato's *The Republic*; Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics;* Epicurus' *Letter to*

Menoeceus and *Leading Doctrines*; Seneca's *On the Happy Life*; Saint Augustine's *The Happy Life* and Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Contra Gentiles* (all selections in *Happiness: Classic and Contemporary Readings and Philosophy* by S. Cahn and C. Vitrano, eds.) and we will attempt to translate their views of the good life in 21st century terms.

The course will conclude with a discussion of two texts which offer an understanding of happiness as a successful confrontation with human suffering: Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* and the Dalai Lama's *The Art of Happiness*.

Envisioned Course Design

The audience for this course will be primarily first semester sophomores who have completed the first two required Core Humanities course and who will choose this course as their third and last required Humanities course. It will be taught as a small discussion-based seminar of about 16 students. Students will be expected to post weekly responses to the readings and class discussions on an electronic bulletin board. In addition, students will be asked to complete a collective substantial research project. Groups of 3 or 4 students will write a 60-80 page journal issue on a general topic. For example, a journal exploring and reflecting on "The Economics of Happiness" might be comprised of a general introduction (written by the group), 3 individual articles (written individually) on narrower sub-topics, a general conclusion (written by the group) and a common general bibliography. These journals will then be posted on the class website and become the reading assignments and discussion topics of the last 2 weeks of the course. At the end of the course, a survey will ask students how "happy" they are with the course.

Project Director I have taught Humanities courses on a wide range of topics every year since my arrival at Scripps in 1989 (see resume for course listing). This course will be a "pilot" course for our recently revised Humanities Core Curriculum. I have never taught this course before.

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